GIDEON'S REVENGE[1]

By ELINOR WYLIE

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GIDEON extinguished the flame wherewith he had lit his pipe; he dropped the match tidily behind the wallflowers, and looked about him with quiet, but incredulous, joy. Standing at the door of the cottage, his head was stooped a little beneath the lintel, partly from actual necessity and partly in a courteous gesture of apology to this exquisite scene in which only children or delicately formed and tinted women might appear appropriate and untarnished. Above him the freshness of the honey-colored thatch contrasted pleasantly with the rose-purple of ancient brick; the watery sheen of the upper windows reflected a few hanging strands of straw, like gilded seaweed observed in the profundity of a wave. Inclosed by its clipped hedge, the garden lay like a small square pool of flowers drawn together in concentrated brightness, as if many larger and grosser gardens had been melted into one and poured into this narrow space. Across the green a dew pond reversed the sky to another pool, and permitted Gideon's vision to plumb without fatigue the utmost depth of the empyrean.

Gideon was a tall old man; his age was perhaps seventy. His face had more of the falcon than the eagle in its lines; the beaked nose, the bony setting of the large bright eyes, the hollowed cheek and temple, were all carved and polished to a pattern sufficiently bold, but light and restless and uneasy. His eyes were gray; his hair, which had once been reddish, had now the faintly yellowed whiteness of flax; it rose steeply to a crest above his brow. The garments which he wore hung somewhat awkwardly upon his emaciation—an emaciation suggesting austerity rather than weak-

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ness. The correct and shabby tweeds were excellent in themselves, molded to fit with easy perfection the scene and circumstance, but although they clothed with tolerable grace the mortal form of Gideon, they did not fit his soul. You saw him preferably in rusty black, with a hat remotely Spanish, and a cloak; decidedly the soul of Gideon wore a black cloak. And indeed at this very moment, within the cottage, Caroline was brushing just such a cloak preparatory to putting it away forever with beautiful cakes of gum camphor crumbling like soft and fragrant ice among its mysterious folds.

Gideon turned and entered the cottage; the rooms appeared deliciously chilled and shadowed by the green orchard to the east. Avoiding the larger chamber, where Caroline whisked fantastic garments into the bland, golden obscurity of a tulip-wood chest of drawers, he turned into the kitchen and surveyed its cool and ordered colors with minute approval. It was a room decorous and subtly bright, a place for the concoction of junkets and cherry pies. Gideon sighed with pleasure; it was a miracle that he, a lawless, bitter man, should have imagined this room and made it. Of course there had been the skeleton ready to his hand—the stone floor, the beams, the fireplace—but he had breathed upon cold ashes, and they had flowered like a domestic rose.

Caroline had climbed the steep little stairs to the attic; he could hear portmanteaus bumping about overhead like huge frolicsome beasts; he had a sudden picture of the trim, pink-faced servant surrounded by portmanteaus and kit-bags, labeled in dusty, barbaric scarlet, enormous in the gloom. He reflected with satisfaction that all his papers were already neatly pigeon-holed in his grandfather's desk and his mother's boule cabinet; Caroline was merely rummaging among ponchos and sombreros.

Slowly, with a fastidious, yet sensual, savoring of his delights, Gideon entered the other room and strolled down its entire length, stopping here and there to touch the lovely surface of wood perversely satin-skinned, or velvet worn and rosy as immemorial lichen. Here again was something more than human in the happy confluence of various times

and manners; he had seen these objects scattered in obscure exile among the Victorian ineptitudes of his mother's vast drawing rooms, or lately huddled ignominiously in storage warehouses; he had purchased some of them carelessly at the ragged ends of the earth, and now they were gathered together under the green and glazing twilight of the apple trees to make a miraculous whole. He had bought a cottage, knocked down a partition or two, and engaged a certain number of pantechnicon vans; he had expected the place to be comfortable and rather absurd, and by some curious necromancy of chance it was grave and exquisite. It was as if it had always been so, and his. Between open windows, his desk was flooded by calm radiance.

As he fingered the firmly packed bundles of letters, bound with pink legal tape, or more sentimentally confined by blue ribbons, he considered the future with approval. It was eminently fitting; it was, indeed, inevitable. How, save under conditions of the most shining peace, could he hope to relax into that judicial clarity of mind so necessary to his great project? The hardships, the astringent horrors of his past career, had precisely steeled his hand to execution; it now remained for a poor, but honest, gentleman to judge the culprits before killing them, and Gideon was acutely aware of the propriety of being equitable to begin with, if only to augment the pleasure of being savage in the final sentence, the final act of revenge.

He stared retrospectively down the lurid vista of the last twenty-five years, his mind's eye blinking, for all its falcon look, in the full chemical glare of recollection. There had been, quite literally, singularly little sunlight in the vista, and that little had quivered to a tropical intensity removed by several continents from this subaqueous glimmer stained by apple trees. But mostly, he remembered, things had happened at night; that was, perhaps, the reason he had achieved so flattering and profitable a reputation as special correspondent.

Special! Oh, very special indeed! For who but Gideon would have been clever enough to be forever on the spot, the often bloody and unhealthy spot, where things were happening at night? What other nocturnal vigilance had

so well observed, what vitriolic pen recorded, alike the curious minutiæ and the vast apocalypse of life? From the beginning to the end of that bewildering vista he had contrived to see the event strangely, and to make the strangeness vivid by his words. Also, he had advanced in wisdom and cunning; he recalled with contempt how crudely he had daubed hell-fire and sanguine upon his earlier efforts. In ninety-eight, when he had seen the *Maine* intemperately uncurl a million fronds of brilliance against the plushy dark, he could not, telling the dreadful thing beheld, curdle the reader's veins as now his lightest, coolest whisper curdled them. The latest of all his writings, the wry, amused account of Lenine stretched upon his crimson upholstery under the great glass bell like some horrible wax flower, blooming through unnatural, and electric, days, that was excellent, that was art.

II

And now, the quarter-century past, he was quit of restraints, of delicacies and decencies; now he was free of galling secret vows and public scruples. The very last of the Pennimans had died twenty years ago in the person of old Joseph; Gideon had kept his promise to Millicent, and Millicent herself had been dead for twenty-five years.

He was free to turn that intricate and fiery engine, his mind, upon the people he had hated and had, for a measured space of time, striven to forget. At first, after his wife's death, he had acidly regretted his promise to her—the promise given to the expiring appeal of her large blue eyes, but never ratified by their wedded spirits in this world or the vaguer one into whose ambiguities she had at once departed. He had kept the promise because it was a promise; he had been totally untrammeled by sympathy for its purpose or its beneficiaries. He had spared the Pennimans for a score of years; he had not written a book, no, not so much as an epitaph upon any of them until two decades had yellowed the latest of their tombs. It had been a hellish bore, but now he was glad he had refrained. The long and lenten abstinence from revenge had but given

edge to his appetite and sharpened his powers to austere perfection.

Gideon drew a dozen slim and pointed pencils from a drawer of the desk; upon its dark-amber surface he placed a formidable pile of copy paper. The book loomed before his happy contemplation, tremendous, Protean, monstrous, yet alluring. A book, but not alone a book; a mighty chase, a dexterous unmasking, a trial, and an execution. And Gideon, at once Justice incarnate and the instrument of Justice, Gideon must be both judge and executioner. The book was to be a headsman's ax, savage, medieval, elegant, and efficient. Then, picturing a row of Penniman faces upon the spikes of Temple Bar, Gideon smiled a slight abstemious smile.

Apart from fancies, however charming, the facts were these; he reviewed them swiftly, leaning back luxuriously in a chair whose polished curves were as velvet to his neuralgic bones. The book was a debt to his own soul, long overdue, heavy with accretion of interest. He had waited, for Millicent's darling and ridiculous sake, until all kith and kin of hers were moldered into complete indifference. She had desired to shield them from anger and annoyance, for surely their fatted, gelded souls were incapable of pain; she had interposed her threadbare little body between their torpor and his vengeance. Very well; it had been so, but now he would remember it all, and set it down, and verily the page should shrivel beneath the fire of his revelation. Though they skulked in their sepulchers, shrouded in this their last cowardice, he would burn them out of oblivion; the flame of their destruction should ascend forever, purified and fervent, sweet in the nostrils of the brave. He would tell the tale; he would release that holy indignation which for so long had made his heart a fever.

Milly—that foolish nickname wherein her family, with characteristic impertinence, had clothed the golden pallor of her girlhood! If Gideon pronounced her name, he enriched the vowels with a foreign inflection which made it more Melisande than Millicent. That was her proper appellation, that long soft veil of sound, fitting her sallow-flaxen beauty with an enduring garment.

She, who had lain so long asleep in his heart, should be brought forth once more into the wide, bright chamber of his mind; he would look at her in the unpitying glare of that illumination. She would stand, willowy and disarming, lovely and ineffectual, beside the solid, stolid forms of her murderers, the Pennimans. Gideon would look at them all; the Pennimans would tremble and grow pale, they would even grow thin perhaps; Millicent would smile. It would not be the smile of her later days, painted narrow and colorless by despair; it would be the smile of the beginning, of hope and casual courage and unconsidered joy. Gideon ground his teeth, thinking how the Pennimans had destroyed her gaiety and trust. She had loved her father and mother; she had even loved the unspeakable Ambrose, with his long nose and liquid, languid eyes; by love she had been broken and undone.

Of course they had opposed the match; they were obstructive by instinct and conviction, and Gideon, who had refused to be a barrister in order to write for the lesser journals, was sufficiently above them in family and below them in fortune to irritate their every prejudice. His wit inflamed their mental tissues like cayenne pepper; his tongue was gall and vinegar. They resented his height and were half afraid of his hair, which was never properly brushed; he seemed an enigma designed to insult them; his doing could not be other than wrong, but his mere being was the radical error. Gideon knew that, and the reflection soothed him; it meant that he had always, even without trying, done his best to please them: his best must always fail with the Pennimans, and he was glad he had not tried too hard. Millicent had tried too hard, and, in foredoomed endeavor, been destroyed.

He had been a strange son-in-law for the Pennimans; he had fluttered that dove-cote with a vengeance. Fat pigeons they were, and Ambrose with the melting gaze of a turtle above his little waistcoat's curve. And Millicent among them, white and fluttering, with her perpetual olive branch: she was truly a dove!

Without the Pennimans, pecking and obese, how far might they not have flown together, Gideon and Millicent,

the falcon and the dove! God knew she had always wanted to be free; God had known it all along, in fact, and that was Gideon's quarrel with God, second only to his quarrel with the Pennimans. For the Deity, frequently invoked by that pious family, had apparently been moved by their flatteries rather than by Gideon's dignified silence; God had not saved Millicent even at the last minute: he had, by allowing her to die, given her back to the Pennimans. Gideon, who had never believed in God, found this impossible to forgive; in his indignation he realized that he was a Christian.

The Pennimans, outrageous to the last, had always blamed him for his wife's death; they had pecked her into shreds while he was cynically examining the Spanish-American War. They had not even taken the trouble to cable news of her illness; he had returned to find her *in extremis*. Gideon was frantic; the Pennimans were sorrowful and mildly complacent. They expressed surprise at his reappearance, and disgust at what they were pleased to term his neglect. Millicent had, apparently, been killed by the absence of a husband whose presence had always, according to the Pennimans, constituted a criminal menace to her health and sanity. The bronze door of the Penniman vault shut firmly upon her mortal remains; the family, in solemn conclave, decided that Gideon was sailing for South Africa with Milly's blood upon his hands. Gideon knew that their own hands were dabbled in her innocence.

Gideon found the South African War a personal convenience, but against the Pennimans he was very bitter, and his amazing despatches, colored and brilliant with hate, were only a partial relief to his feelings. He found it impossible to dislike the Boers with the authentic fervor so desirable in a special correspondent; quite deliberately he dipped his pen into his private gall before writing, and his passionate loathing for a respectable family at Wimbledon fired half England to a pure flame of patriotism. But it was all very unsatisfactory and rather troublesome, this inner pretense that Cronje and Wessels were in reality Mrs. Penniman and Ambrose. His despatches were devoured raw by the popular appetite, but he himself went hungry;

he starved for his revenge. Gideon, remembering those days, laughed heartily. How fierce he had been, and how frustrate!

The sunlight fell across his dusky golden desk, and still he remembered, and did not write. That was twenty-five years ago, and this was England, and he was old, but neither frustrate nor starving. The Gideon of the Transvaal had been a widowed Gideon of forty-odd, bereaved and raging—a Gideon who had but just observed the wife of his romantic youth go down to the grave shrunken to premature decay, quenched in body and soul, the clear flame withered, the bright stem trodden underfoot. For a long and parching term of years he had beheld her obliquely in the flawed mirror of her dying face; later he had shut his eyes while she slept in his heart. Now he looked at her again, in the cool and blessed light of these windows, in the peace of this quiet room; she was a girl again, and beautiful. But Millicent had always been beautiful.

It was the other Pennimans who had been ugly; how ugly he shuddered to recall. He drew a packet of papers toward him. These were photographs of the criminals, letters from Milly, letters from Ambrose, his own wild scrawls. Gideon adjusted his spectacles.

III

At seven o'clock Caroline lit the lamp; it was a pale unluminous yellow against the western window-panes, where rose color was fading. Half an hour later she placed a small tray at Gideon's elbow; the noiseless hand was also skilful, for the cutlet was done to a turn, the coffee superlative. Gideon ate and drank, thanking the stars now set in chrysoprase above the apple trees. At nine he put down the last of the letters, and, lifting one of the photographs, examined it intently. A curious trembling seized him; he appeared a prey to obscure emotions, and his face was visibly convulsed.

The picture, a highly glazed *carte-de-visite* of the eighties, showed a family group augmented by one stranger: it showed, clearly enough, the four Pennimans and Gideon.

There, seated side by side, were old Joseph and his wife; at their feet was Ambrose; behind them, poised as if for flight, the less substantial forms of Gideon and Millicent wavered against a painted frieze of foliage. The faces were remarkably distinct—distinct as the golden syllables of Harrogate bitten into grayish cardboard below them.

The photograph completed at a single shattering blow the annihilation of Gideon's hard-won calm. The tears poured from his eyes upon the glassy countenance of Ambrose, while Gideon laughed and laughed.

Here, presented upon a little slip of grimy cardboard, was the whole stupendous farce; the farce was here reduced to such miniature proportions that the human eye could grasp it and the human understanding contain it without effort. During the last three hours, while letter after letter passed into the relentless illumination of his mind, Gideon had gradually perceived the outlines of this farce; they were at first too huge for his comprehension. But now, under the complacent glow of the lamp, the picture made them very plain, very clear and definite.

The Pennimans were funny, and he was a fool. They had always been funny, and he had always been a blazing fool not to see it. They were harmless and absurd; anyone with eyes in his head could see that now. Joseph was funny and innately charming; a perfect Cruikshank portrait of a blustering, heavy father born fifty years too late. Mrs. Penniman was funny and pathetic and rather a dear; yes, she was entirely a dear, with her cotton-wool hair and her face like a frightened baby's. And Ambrose was funny, and—well, Ambrose was enormously funny; Gideon left it at that. As for Millicent and Gideon, they were funniest of all; they were, he realized, tremendous.

There was Milly—and oh, how right the Pennimans had been to call her Milly! There she was, in her famous green silk frock from Liberty's, looking like a Du Maurier drawing executed not in ink, but in China tea, the sweet little ghost of a Du Maurier drawing. How sweet she looked, and how extraordinarily silly! Yes, of course, that was the word; that was precisely it—silly Milly, adorably silly Milly, clinging to the arm of her devoted young husband.

To the stalwart arm? Perhaps not quite to the stalwart arm, but at least to the protecting arm of a fiercely possessive Gideon in the first of all the black cloaks, with the biggest and blackest of all the sombreros pulled down over smoldering eyes, whose expression was accurately compounded of love for his bride and haughty malevolence for the rest of the world. Which meant, mostly, the Pennimans. No wonder poor Ambrose lifted his own eyes in alarm to the face of his tall brother-in-law.

Was it possible that he had ever believed himself a suitable husband for that delightful little idiot in green silk and Italian corals who was so obviously made of pink sugar candy? Both sun and rain must inevitably melt the pretty creature; the chills and ardors of common life must reduce her to crumbs of sugary dust. Brittle and soft and sweet, Milly was always sweet. Oh, he had loved her right enough, and she had loved him; but Milly had loved every one, and Gideon had loved no one but Milly.

Was it possible that he had ever expected the Pennimans to understand his plans, his ambitions, for Milly and himself? He laughed again to remember the mixture of frigid courtesy and contempt with which he had invariably met their suggestions and advice. He might as well have worn a black mask in addition to the outrageous sombrero for all he had ever let them see of his thoughts or intensities of feeling. Not that it mattered; he was such piercing vinegar to their emollient oil. It was nobody's fault: they were all of them good and kind; Milly was an angel, a sugar angel; and the young, thin, eager Gideon no more than an impulsive and infatuated fool. What a fool he had been to burden himself with such confectionery! What a fool she had been to entrust herself to his hot and sticky grasp! It was a miracle that they had survived so long in each other's strange company.

Gideon again bent his falcon gaze upon the photograph, and his laughter was quenched in pity. The people in the picture were all so ridiculous and serious and profoundly innocent, and now he might laugh at them as much as he liked. He could never laugh with them, and it was nobody's fault.

And the book? Gone, like a gorgeous thundercloud, tiger-streaked, into profound oblivion. Dead, like the Pennimans, who, in its death, were prodigally revenged.

Gideon stooped, and set a match to the fire. It flew upward like a sanguine flower, and the room was roseate instead of amber-yellow in the lamplight. Its colors glowed from new planes and facets; its shapes were subtly altered and enhanced. Caroline came in quietly with the whisky and soda.

Presently Gideon rose, and lit his pipe. A tall and solitary figure, he stood gazing into the lambent mystery of the fire; he sighed gently.

"I suppose I shall have to learn to dislike my neighbors," he told himself in a low voice. "One might write a grim realistic novel about those squat dark people at Skatt's Farm."

But at the back of his mind was a sick conviction that they were probably quite pleasant, harmless people, and after a little while he took his candlestick from the hall table and went upstairs to bed.

He jumped very quickly between the cool sheets, and fell asleep trying hard to hate the squat dark people at Skatt's Farm. But the dreadful part of it was that Gideon could not hate them.